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ABSTRACT

This booklet is designed to assist schools or school systems in analyzing and evaluating student writing, writing instruction, and the writing program. The basic assumption is that improving the writing program needs to be a school-wide effort coordinated across K-12 grade levels, not an individual or isolated effort. After an overview and advice on getting started, the booklet discusses the assessment of student writing, with subsections on state writing assessments; students' writing based on criteria and benchmarks; teachers' observations, anecdotal records, and insights; and students' self-evaluation and reflections. The next section addresses assessment of writing instruction, with subsections on compiling and analyzing information and the importance of the writing process in writing instruction. The last section discusses assessment of the writing program. A list of 12 resources is attached. An appendix contains a list of 15 key factors associated with effective writing instruction; a list of 10 factors that helped a high school teacher's students do well on a state writing assessment; an evaluation guide for essays; a sample student synopsis and response to "Cyrano de Bergerac"; information regarding the assessment of writing in North Carolina; and a description of the writing program at Burlington (North Carolina) City School System (grades 3-12). (RS)

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ED 414 601

Evaluating and Improving Student Writing and Writing Instruction:

A Systematic Approach

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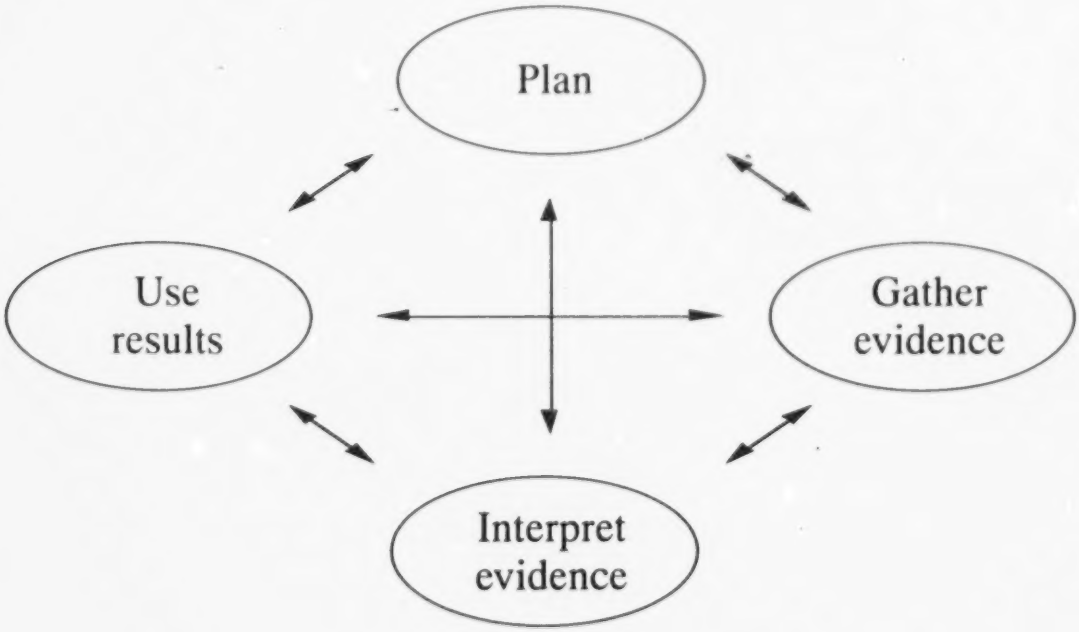
Overview

Evaluating and Improving Student Writing and Writing Instruction: A Systematic Approach

The purpose of this publication is to assist schools or school systems in analyzing and evaluating student writing, writing instruction, and the writing program. Our basic assumption is that improving the writing program needs to be a school-wide effort which is coordinated across grade levels, not an individual or isolated effort. Therefore, we encourage a systemic and systematic approach and envision the audience of this publication as a team which includes teachers, administrators, and parents working together to evaluate the writing program, implement change, and assess progress.

This systematic approach can be tailored for all grade levels, kindergarten through 12th. We refer to the state writing assessments at grades 4, 7, and 10 as providing evidence for how well students write; this does not imply, however, that a critical self-study is appropriate for only those grade levels or for only those assessments. We encourage the leadership team which takes responsibility for the critical self-study to use professional judgment and knowledge of their students to adjust and individualize this process.

The following model illustrates the different phases of this systematic approach:



Please note that the phases of this model are recursive and interactive.

Likewise, the Critical Questions, which we believe will be helpful in a school's or a school system's self-study, do not represent a formula or a series of steps. Rather they represent a recursive process that often involves interrelated, but not necessarily sequential, phases.

The purpose of the questions presented in this publication is to foster critical self-study. We envision this self-study operating on several levels:

- Assessment of the students' writing
- Assessment of writing instruction
- Assessment of the writing program

Getting Started

Critical Question: Who should be involved in the process of evaluating and improving student writing and writing instruction?

The critical study group could be a committee or task force composed of educators and parents, an entire faculty and all administrators, or representatives from each grade level or department. There can be a separate leadership team or a team leader such as a lead teacher or an administrator.

In order to insure maximum ownership and fairness, establish and publicize rules for the critical self-study. For example:

1. Everyone can be involved.
2. No one has to be involved.
3. Once decisions are made, everyone supports the implementation.

(Glickman,1993)

Finally, you need to consider these questions:

- Are all teachers in the school or system responsible in some way for writing instruction? How is this responsibility shared and documented?
- How should parents and students be represented on a critical self-study committee?
- What is the best way to maximize everyone's involvement and ownership of the process?

Critical Question: What are our goals?

Just as the student is the center of instruction and of assessment, the student should also be the focus of critical self-study. Therefore, "What are we trying to accomplish for students?" should be the primary inquiry behind this systematic approach.

Begin with a goal that centers on improving student writing, not improving students' writing scores. Students who write with confidence and control in multiple modes will be successful on the state writing assessments. Students who are "drilled" in how to perform well on a particular writing assessment will probably have a limited command of other modes and purposes of writing, and their enthusiasm for and ownership of their writing may suffer.

Thus, a refinement of the critical question "What are our goals?" should focus on the following question:

What do we want our students to be and to be able to do as writers?

Response to this question is a crucial phase of the critical self-study. Spend a sufficient amount of time conceptualizing, discussing, and agreeing upon the targets you wish to set for your students.

Sample responses could be:

Students use writing as a tool for organizing information and for learning content in all disciplines.

Students view themselves as authors and are perceptive and careful observers looking for topics they wish to write about.

Students are comfortable and confident in writing for various audiences and multiple purposes.

Assessment of Student Writing

Critical Question: How can we assess how well our students are currently writing?

Once you have discussed who will be involved in the process and what your goals for your students are, you need to collect evidence of how well your students are currently writing. We suggest that you examine four different sources of evidence in this stage:

I. evidence from the state writing assessments at grades 4, 7, and 10
II. evidence from students' writing, based on criteria and benchmarks
III. teachers' observations, anecdotal records, and insights
IV. students' self-evaluations and reflections

State Writing Assessments

I. **What information do the State Writing Assessments give us about our students' writing?**

Disaggregated data from 4th, 7th, and 10th grade assessments can give useful information. Look at the distribution of your scores over time in two ways:

1. the distribution of scores at one grade level over the course of two to four years
2. the distribution of scores of the same students over time

The following chart, which is an actual example of one school system's scores, illustrates the usefulness of data:

Grade 4 System X	No. tested		4.0	3.5	3.0	2.5	2.0	1.5	1.0	ns
1993	259		2.3	3.1	11.6	12.0	46.3	13.9	10.8	
1994	258	Percent	1.2	.4	17.1	19.0	44.6	10.1	7.8	
1995	226		2.2	5.3	23.5	28.3	34.1	4.4	2.2	

From 1993 to 1995, this system has significantly, and consistently, lowered the percentages of 1.0, 1.5, and 2.0 papers. At the same time, it has increased the percentages of 2.5 and 3.0 papers. The exception to this pattern in the percentages of 3.5 and 4.0 papers may be a result of the small numbers of students in these categories, or the teachers may wish to ask themselves if the writing instruction in this system needs more depth and richness for stronger writers.

One quick way to check if this may be the case is by looking at the Academically Gifted students and their scores, a figure which is on the summary report for the school system. For this particular school system, in 1994, 24 AG students took the 4th grade writing assessment; 10 scored a 3.0 and 8 scored a 2.5. In 1995, 20 AG 4th graders took the assessment and 8 scored a 3.0 and 5 scored a 2.5.

These scores do seem to justify a second look at the writing instruction which academically gifted students are receiving. However, since we are looking at a small number of students, only 24, we need to be careful about drawing conclusions based only on scores.

A note of caution is in order: large numbers of student scores from across the school or system usually portray an accurate overall picture of student writing. Small numbers of student scores, certainly an individual's score, may be highly unreliable. Therefore, it is very important not just to analyze student scores but also to analyze students' scored papers. However, the Summary Reports give scores broken down by race, gender, and by categories of handicapped or non-handicapped, and it is very important to look at the distribution of scores in these categories to insure equity and balance in the instructional program.

The following student paper, which is included in the Scoring Guide for the English II Essay, was written by a 10th grader in response to this prompt:

Most of us have read a particular work that has made a change in our lives. It may have been a novel, play, short story, poem, or newspaper article. Think of a work that is special to you. Something about the work made it particularly meaningful to you, and you will always remember how you felt reading the work. Tell about a time when you read a meaningful piece of writing. What made you remember the work?

- Be sure to focus on a time when you read a special work.
- Be sure to give specific details about the work and the effect it had on you.
- Tell about the events before, during, and after you read the work.
- Write in complete sentences.
- Check to be sure that you are writing in good sentences.
- Use correct grammar, spelling, capitalization, and punctuation.

Possible teacher observations and comments are written beside the student's paper.

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When I was a little girl in ruffles and pigtails, my great-grandma would always recite poetry to me. I can still remember the mile-high stacks of dusty poetry books that collected in the corners of her reading room. Each time I would go for a visit she would introduce a new poetry book to me, though I had not yet learned to read. She would recite the verses to her "little love" and I would learn them. I learned poems from the pens of Robert Louis Stevenson to Mother Goose. But out of all those well-known poet's works of art, my favorite poem of all was by an anonymous writer. The poem went like this:

> "Little fly upon the wall, Ain't you got no clothes a'tall? Ain't you got no shimmy shirt? Ain't you got no pretty skirt? Ain't you cold?"

The "ruffles and pigtails" are almost a stereotype. The name "little love," however, gives a personal and authentic sense of the grandma's voice.

The poem is whimsical, catching the reader's interest. Reciting the poem in its entirety, rather than referring to it, makes a strong contribution to the paper.

The way great-grandma would recite the poem–her eyes bulged out; her hands forming massive images–was something to see. Every time I heard the poem, I begged for it to be read again. I never seemed to become tired of that poem, and neither did she.

Good image-"eyes bulged"

Note the smooth flow of the last sentence.

Also note the variety of sentence patterns.

Once we made a cardboard fly and stuck it to her wall (dressed, of course, in a small pair of hand-sewn pantiloons). This fly remained on her wall until the day she died.

One of the most powerful, specific details–the image is vivid and advances the story.

Every day I would ask mommy to read poetry to me. I sat through the "classics," but could not wait until she hit page eighteen, for that was the residence of the little fly.

Why does she call her "mommy"?

As I became older, that ragged-edged old poetry book grew closer to my heart. Sure, it was barely holding together–the cover was warped and the binding was split–but what was on the inside of the book is what mattered.

The descriptions here do not really move the story forward or deepen the reader's understanding–the last phrase is a cliche.

Even now, I will find myself picking up the tattered book and unsconsientiously flipping right to page eighteen. It brings back those memories that will never be lived again. And most of all, it makes you appreciate those cold little flies!

The whimsical last sentence reestablishes the tone of the poem and gives a sense of completeness.

The comments of the scorers of the writing assessment were as follows:

SCORE POINT 5: The writer of this paper exhibits strengths in all four criteria. There is a clear progression of ideas, no break in sequencing, a highly personal tone, varied and effective sentence structure and many concrete, specific details to develop the response evenly.

Looking at the student's score, or even reading the comments of the scorers, would not establish for the teacher the student's command of narrative and how well she tells her story, beginning with a description of herself as a little girl who could not yet read and ending as a young woman who cherishes books and their contents. Nor would it establish areas the student should concentrate on and strengthen. For example, much of the language is strong and vivid, yet at times the writer falls back on cliched phrases and on "telling" rather than "showing."

Thus, it is in reading students' papers and making and recording observations that we, as teachers, gather our most important and useful information.

Individually, read at least a representative sample of student papers in every scored category and record observations on the following topics:

- What consistent strengths do I see?
- What inconsistencies do I see in the students' writing?
- What difficulties do I see at different levels? at all levels?
- What do my findings indicate about future instructions?

The members of the critical study group may wish to develop a data gathering grid to record and display findings, ideas, and observations. Possible categories could include:

- criteria (main idea, supporting details, organization, coherence)
- general writing benchmarks:
    1. Possesses the attitudes, habits, and dispositions of a writer
    2. Uses strategies in the composing processes to write literary, informational, or practical texts
    3. Writes literary, information, and practical texts to convey meaning to learn, and to clarify thinking
- benchmarks for the specific grade level of the students.

After you have collected information by individual readings, share and discuss your recorded observations as a critical-study team:

- What differences of perceptions and ideas do you have?
- How can you reach consensus about these ideas?
- Collectively, what conclusions about your students' writing can you draw?

Students' Writing Based on Criteria and Benchmarks

II. What evidence do we gain from the writing the students do in and out of the classroom?

One snapshot provided by a writing assessment cannot give a complete picture of the student's writing ability. In much the same way that a photograph album shows a more accurate representation of a person than any one snapshot, a portfolio or sample of student's writing can add richness and depth to an assessment of the student's writing ability. Therefore, it is not sufficient to look at just the writing which students do on the state writing assessments; you should also look at multiple forms of writing which students do for various purposes and audiences. Please make sure that writing assignments do include multiple forms of writing; if students are not writing in this diverse way, it is an indication that the writing program needs to be expanded and enriched.

The writing assessments give an indication of how well students can perform within certain parameters. Consider what samples can be collected that extend those parameters.

State Writing Assessments	Varied Writing Samples
Students write for one audience	Students write for multiple audiences
Writing takes place during one timed sitting	Writing may be revised multiple times during flexible time periods
The prompt is given to the writer	Writers choose their own prompts or topics
All students write to the same prompt	Writers draw on their unique experiences

The state writing assessments focus on narrative, expository, descriptive, and argumentative modes of writing. Other types of student writing which should be assigned and assessed in the classroom include:

- Diaries
- Newspaper articles
- Advertisements
- Journals
- Brochures
- Messages
- Want Ads
- Announcements
- Commercials
- Reviews
- Learning logs
- Creative writing–poems, plays, stories
- Technical writing
- Interviews
- Letters–business and personal
- Reports
- Summaries
- Posters
- Song Lyrics
- Comic strips
- Research
- Writing to learn: science, math, social studies, art, foreign language

The varied samples of students' writing will differ from the writing assessment in several ways: purposes, audiences, modes. Thus, the criteria by which we judge that writing will also differ. We strongly recommend that you make sure your understanding of the criteria is rich and internalized by engaging in activities such as the following:

Individually, write down your explanation or description of the four criteria used by the state. Confer with your colleagues to see how closely you agree. Your final list may look something like this:

Criteria	Explanation
Main idea	Focus that stays on topic and intrigues the reader
Supporting details	Elaboration that is specific, relevant, well-developed, and powerful
Organization	Clear, logical, controlled progression of ideas
Coherence	Unified and connected transitions

Now brainstorm and define other criteria which may be important for evaluating varied pieces of student writing. Your list may look something like this:

Criteria	Explanation
Voice	Individual flavor or personality of the author that gives energy and uniqueness to the writing
Word Choice	Vocabulary that is rich, precise, colorful, yet natural
Power of Ideas	Ideas that are informative, engaging, and accurate
Creativity of Ideas	Innovative, thought-provoking, distinctive, perceptive ideas

Keep in mind that the varied samples of student writing will be evaluated on criteria that may differ from the criteria used by the state writing assessments. Certainly, the audiences, modes, and purposes will differ. Nevertheless, the next stage of the evaluation process asks you to consider what you can learn about your students' writing abilities that goes beyond and enriches the information you have from the writing assessments.

Collect sample writings or portfolios for a representative group of students. Individually

- read the sample writings
- compare them with the student's assessment score and scored paper
- record your observations using the following questions as springboards:

- Are there strengths in the student's writing that transfer from varied samples to assessment writing?
- Are there strengths in the varied samples which are not as pronounced in the assessment writing?
- Are there areas which need more attention in the assessment writing than in varied student writings?

After you have read and analyzed the writing of several students who represent different achievement levels, discuss as a critical-study group:

- What generalizations can we make about the writing abilities of our students?
- What implications does this information have for future instruction?

Teachers' Observations, Anecdotal Records, and Insights

III. What do teacher observations and insights tell us about our students' writing?

The following questions may help you to structure your observations:

- Are students enthusiastic about and engaged in writing?
- Do students write every day?
- Do students engage in a writing process?
- Do students engage in peer review and self-critique?
- Is the reading-writing connection explicit and strong for students?
- Do students write for multiple purposes, diverse audiences, and in various modes?

Most teachers find that a user-friendly form is helpful for self-reflection and recording observations. In this part of the critical self-study, teachers are collecting information about their students' writing that usually cannot be evaluated in the writing itself. For example, attitude, ownership, and flexibility need to be observed and inferred from watching students write. Construct an observation sheet that will allow you to focus easily on those aspects of your students' writing which you particularly wish to observe and then record your ideas quickly and efficiently.

Characteristics of the Writer	My observations:
Engages in and is enthusiastic about writing	
Displays pride in and ownership of written products	
Willingly or voluntarily writes often	
Consistently uses self and peer review for revising	
Makes connections between what she/he reads and writes	
Willingly or voluntarily engages in a writing process Date:	Other observations:

This form is only an example; experiment and modify for the form that is most user-friendly and convenient for you.

Students' Self-evaluations and Reflections

IV. What do students' self-evaluations and reflections tell us about their writing ability?

Asking for students' self-evaluation and reflections is not only a good instructional tool that helps them develop their metacognitive abilities, it also can give valuable information to the teacher.

Ask students to write a self-assessment and a projection of their score after they have taken the writing assessment. Compare their actual score with their prediction; you may want the students to also make this comparison.

Be sure to collect self-evaluative information from students not only in regard to their performance on the writing assessment, but also about their perceptions of their overall writing ability. A series of questions can be useful, for example:

Yes	No	
		Planning
__	__	1. It helps if I play with my ideas and plan before I begin to write.
__	__	2. I like to talk with someone else before I begin to write.
		Sense of Control
__	__	3. I often don't know if what I have written is what I really meant.
__	__	4. When I get stuck, I use strategies to help me.
		Evaluation
__	__	5. As I write, I think about how my reader will react.
__	__	6. I know when my writing is good and when it needs work.
__	__	7. I set goals for myself to improve my writing.

Assessment of Writing Instruction

Critical Question: How can we assess the quality of our current writing instruction?

Compiling and Analyzing Information

I. Compile the information you have gathered about your students' writing and look for patterns of strengths and weaknesses. One good way to do this is to determine significant categories and summarize according to those areas. For example, you may ask yourself what your students' writing indicates about these categories of writing mastery:

	Strengths	Weaknesses
Attitudes		
Control of writing, including progression of ideas and language		
Ability to elaborate, explain, give detail		
An organizational framework that is not a stilted or formulaic structure		
Coherence and a smooth flow of words		

II. Draw some reasonable conclusions about the patterns of student strengths and weakness. For example, if students display attitudes of confidence about their writing teachers have probably made writing as risk-free as possible, indicating that students' writing will be accepted and valued even if it has weaknesses.

Conclusions about writing instruction based on student strengths:

1.

2.

3.

4.

5.

Conclusions about writing instruction based on student weaknesses:

1.

2.

3.

4.

5.

III. Collect systematic observations about classroom instruction over a period of time. In order to facilitate this collection of observations, agree to a series of questions or conditions which each teacher will use to guide the collection of observations for her or his own room.

Observation Form	
Do my students:	Observations:
engage in prewriting using diverse and individual forms of prewriting?	
write for multiple purposes and audiences?	
chose their own topics as well as write to prompts they are given?	
make connections between reading and writing, looking at how authors use strategies, different purposes, knowledge of the audience, etc.	
write every day, often for real audiences and real purposes?	
publish in multiple forms?	

Observation Form	
Does my writing instruction:	Observations:
inform and include parents?	
include modes appropriate to the grade level?	
explicitly teach criteria for evaluation?	
include writing to learn as well as writing to communicate?	
provide multiple opportunities for feedback from self, peers, teacher, others?	
explicitly teach revision for adding, deleting, substituting, rearranging ideas?	
differentiate between revising for ideas and editing for mistakes in spelling, grammar, punctuation?	

Observation Form	
Do I:	Observations:
engage in writing myself and share that writing with students?	
read aloud to students so they have good models?	
explicitly teach skills and strategies when students show that they need them?	
give opportunities to get feedback and then revise before a final evaluation of the paper?	
build on the positive aspects of students' writing?	
conference with students often?	
allow students to do most of the talking during conferences?	

Observation Form	
Do the classroom organization and rules:	Observations
provide clear directions so students know how and when to engage in writing activities?	
provide opportunities for students to work individually and with peers?	
provide a portfolio or writing folder which shows student progress?	
provide supplies such as dictionaries, checklists, a computer, etc?	
provide flexibility so that all students are not always engaged in the same writing activity?	
provide a print-rich environment with diverse models of writing?	
allow students to work on their own topics at their own paces at least some of the time?	

The Writing Process:
Its Importance in Writing Instruction

The English Language Arts Standard Course of Study describes the writing process in this way: "Writing should be taught as a natural and integral part of the curriculum. Instruction should encourage whole pieces of writing for real purposes and real audiences (and should include all stages of the writing process). The stages of the writing process include prewriting, drafting, revising, editing, and publishing."

It is very important for students to understand, internalize, and "own" the writing process which they use, as Kathleen Black demonstrated in her humorous "Student's View of the Writing Process" taken from *Journal of Reading*, November 1991:

One Student's View of the Writing Process

Step 1:	Wait Patiently
Step 2:	Get Hit by Lightening Bolt of Inspiration
Step 3:	Write Wonderful Paper
Step 4:	Get Picked apart by Cruel Teacher

Equally important is our growing understanding that there is not one writing process; rather the writing process is individual and unique for each writer. Not only is the writing process recursive, it is also fluid and flexible, changing from context to context, from writer to writer.

Prewriting

Prewriting is probably the most important stage in the writing process and may take the most time. The more students "play around" with ideas, giving themselves time to engage in various mental and physical activities, the richer and more complex their writing will be. Note, for example, the differences in the forms that pre-writing can take by looking at the following chart, which defines exploring and planning, then differentiates some of the mental actions and the physical actions the writer can engage in. These actions will vary tremendously depending upon the task, the audience, the purpose, and the individual style of the writer. Requiring all writers to go through a series of steps, defined by the teacher, is not as rich or as rigorous as teaching and coaching students in defining and exploring their own ways of prewriting.

Prewriting Activities

Definition	Mental Actions	Physical Actions
Exploring: examining the external world and the internal world of idea, preparing to make decisions about planning	Sensing a reason to write	Jotting notes
	Considering the subject	Asking questions
	Recalling prior knowledge	Reading
	Considering voice	Discussing ideas
	Considering audience	Reviewing
Planning: making a set of decisions about content and order of the writing	Examining beliefs	Drawing
	Subvocalizing	Doodling
	Retrieving information	Talking aloud
	Choosing a subject	Cubing
	Prioritizing	Looping
	Organizing	

Drafting

Adequate time must also be allotted for drafting. Just as brainstorming is the pouring out of ideas orally, drafting is the pouring out of words on paper to catch the ideas. Students begin with the notes or ideas generated during prewriting. The first draft may be kept in a journal, writer's notebook, writing center, writing folder, portfolio, or on a computer disk. Students are also encouraged to explore a topic without grammatical inhibitions or over concern about spelling and punctuation--concern for those aspects of writing occur during the editing stage. The teacher's role is to encourage students to "get it down" and to provide time and opportunity to do so.

Revising

Revising is a very important stage in the writing process, with many of the same mental activities of the prewriting stage: exploring, (re)considering priorities, (re)planning. Encourage students not to think of revising as the stage where the paper is "copied over ." Rather, students need to engage in "re-vision" or seeing it again from a fresh perspective. Conferences with peers, teachers, and parents are vital at this stage to help students gain that fresh perspective and to reconsider and change ideas and language.

Editing

Editing is the stage in which the writing is made suitable for publication. The teacher must instruct students that the purpose of this phase is to "re-see" the content and organization. Additionally, students are to locate and correct errors in punctuation, capitalization, spelling, usage, and sentence structure so that errors in conventions do not interfere with a reader's ability to understand the message. Students who save drafts on computer disks can avoid the possible "write it over" tedium of editing.

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Publishing

Publishing the writer's work completes the composing process. Publication provides the opportunity for the writer's product to be shared with and/or evaluated by the intended audience or readers in general. Without some type of publication, students may forget or never realize that their writing is meaningful communication. Publication can be as simple as posting papers on the class bulletin board and oral sharing or as elaborate as compiling class and individual books. Other ways in which student work can be shared are school or grade-level newspapers, literary magazines, pen pals, taped stories, and written work exchanged with another class or school.

It is important to note that not every piece that a writer begins will be carried through the entire writing process and polished for publication. However, each student should be encouraged to develop some pieces of writing thoroughly enough to be published. Publishing is an important motivator in working through the stages of the composing process. The purpose of publishing is to reinforce the idea that writing is an act of communication.

Assessment of the Writing Program

Critical Question: How can we assess the quality of our writing program?

Coordination across grade levels for writing instruction

In a quality writing program, teachers understand how writing proficiency spans a continuum across grades and how writing instruction needs to be coordinated accordingly. Some questions that you will want to consider include:

- Is there a written plan or a description of the school-wide or system-wide writing program?
- Does this writing plan clearly specify the modes of writing on which students are assessed in grades 4, 7, and 10 and the criteria by which they will be assessed?
- Does the plan specify how and when these modes of writing and criteria are introduced and reinforced?
- Does the plan include ways that writing is used as a tool for learning in all subjects at the elementary level?
- Does it specify how writing is used as a tool for learning in all content courses at the secondary level?
- How are school administrators involved in implementing and assessing the writing program?
- Do administrators understand the characteristics of a good writing program and what indicators should be present in classroom instruction?
- Are parents informed about writing objectives and encouraged to extend writing activities at home?
- Have school-wide or system-wide standards regarding the quality of student writing been established?
- Are these standards being consistently and uniformly applied?

Coordination across grade levels for student learning

Students need to understand how what they have learned from previous years provides a basis for their current learning. Some questions you will want to consider include:

- Do students have an opportunity to self-assess themselves regularly and establish goals for themselves in writing?
- Do they periodically review and reassess these goals across grade levels?
- Do students have a cumulative folder or a showcase portfolio that spans grade levels and includes representative modes of writing at different grade levels?

The importance of staff development

A good writing program needs continuous staff development and opportunities for professional dialogue. Questions you need to address include:

- Have faculty and administrators participated in planning and implementing a staff development program for writing?
- Is this staff development ongoing?
- Have teachers been given opportunities to experience demonstration teaching, sharing of ideas with colleagues, coaching, and class visitations?
- Is there a professional library readily available that includes publications and professional books on writing?
- Are administrators involved in the staff development activities on a regular basis?

The English Language Arts Standard Course of Study defines an effective writing program as one which encourages the following conditions in classrooms:

daily opportunities to write
daily opportunities to share writing
opportunities to select writing topics
opportunities to participate in appropriate pre-writing activities
opportunities to clarify the writing assignment as to purpose, audience, format
opportunities to experiment with language
time allotted for multiple drafting
instructional focus on effective writing strategies
writing as an extension activity for literature study
collaborative writing
opportunities to write for authentic purposes and real audiences
teacher-student conferences
on-going assessment.

An important aspect of assessing the writing program is a periodic check to make sure that these conditions are a part of each classroom.

Finally, there are ways other than the ones suggested here that the critical study group may wish to use to assess the quality of student writing, writing instruction, and the writing program. Two very important sources of information, for example, are feedback about the performance of the school system's graduates from business/ industry and from colleges/ universities.

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Appendix

Marcia Farr and Harvey Daniels in Language Diversity and Writing Instruction have isolated fifteen key factors that are associated with effective writing instruction:

1. **Teachers who understand and appreciate the basic linguistic competence that students bring with them to school, and who therefore have positive expectations for students' achievements in writing**
   "...the most basic distinction between successful and unsuccessful instructors was their attitude toward their students...The less effective teachers were more likely to view their students' language as being underdeveloped or deficient." Even when teacher with these attitudes "used the most exemplary, research-validated teaching methods," their students failed to achieve expected growth. "We place teacher expectations at the top of our list for effective writing instructions."

2. **Regular and substantial practice in writing, aimed at developing fluency**
   "Writing practice is important in several ways...experience can build familiarity and comfort, leading to the relatively fluent written language...they (students) need writing practice because writing, like other aspects of human language, is best learned in actual use."

3. **The opportunity to write for real, personally significant purposes**
   "Where school programs have stressed writing for a broad range of real purposes, students' writing skills have shown substantial growth."

4. **Experience in writing for a wide range of audiences, both inside and outside of school**
   "Real audiences give students much-needed practice in one of a writer's most fundamental skills: adjusting discourse to the anticipated needs of the reader... Real audiences exert a natural pressure to edit and revise the work. Students are willing to polish and refine, not because a teacher demands it, but because they want their writing to achieve its purpose with a particular audience."

5. **Rich and continuous reading experiences, including both published literature of acknowledged merit and the work of peers and instructors**
   "When children read, they unconsciously internalize the patterns of written language they are encountering at many levels...writing programs that stress reading as a part of the instructional process have shown significant growth in students' performance."

6. **Exposure to models of writing in process and writers at work, including both teachers and classmates**
   "If students have little experience with seeing writers work, they are likely to develop misconceptions about what skilled writers actually do. One of the most common myths is that the better the writer, the more orderly, swift, and painless his writing process will be."

7. **Instruction in the process of writing; that is, learning to work at given writing tasks in appropriate phases, including prewriting, drafting, and revising**
"Teaching writing as a process offers an excellent opportunity...not just to write better but to practice the crucial academic skill of refining a piece of work over time. The teacher's ...job is to break writing projects into stages...to devise prewriting activities that provide both time and methods for giving material, to provide drafting time in class, with feedback and technical assistance available from teacher and peers, to treat revision as a normal and essential part of writing, with time, resources, and collaborative effort devoted to helping authors rewrite."

8. **Collaborative activities for students that provide ideas for writing and guidance for revising works in progress**
"The harnessing of collaborative spirit has been manifested in two main ways...the writing workshop approach, especially favored in elementary schools, provides unstructured, continuous and free-flowing student collaboration on pieces of writing and on specific writing problems...At the secondary level peer editing or response groups are the more common collaborative practice. In this procedure, groups of three to five students serve as each other's regular audience, editors, or collaborators."

9. **One-to-one writing conferences with the teacher**
The conference method seems to be an effective practice because the conferences "provide what Jerome Bruner has called 'scaffolding,' a mechanism by which a more experienced learner or thinker provides intellectual scaffolds–temporary support structures--that assist a learner in developing new thinking. For conferences to work, the teacher must first establish work assignments for everyone in the class, activities that continue while the teacher turns his or her attention to a series of individual students. Usually, what goes on during this time is a writing workshop, in which students can work at planning, creating, and revising, exchanging drafts quietly with each other; reading peer's work and writing critiques; and the like."

10. **Direct instruction in specific strategies and techniques for writing**
"We have learned to recognize the natural language-learning capacities of students; but there are also important roles for the teacher beyond being an audience, model, and organizer of peer groups....there is a place for active instruction too."

11. **Reduced instruction in grammatical terminology and related drills, with increased use of sentence combining activities**
"Scores of research studies have been conducted on this topic since the turn of the century, and the vast majority have shown no positive correlation between grammar training and writing quality. In fact, a number of studies have shown a negative relationship between instruction in formal grammar and writing performance... Abstract descriptive knowledge about linguistic phenomena does not necessarily help a person use language in any particular way, any more than

knowing the names of the concentric organs of a tree will help you grow one, climb one, or cut one down. A better reason for teaching grammar is to provide teacher and students with a meta-language with which to talk about sentences in written texts."

12. **Teaching of writing mechanics and grammar in the context of students' actual compositions, rather than in separate drills or exercises**
"Researchers have confirmed the value of teaching mechanics in the context of real writing; that is treating mechanics as a part of revising or editing. The mechanical skills are taught only as the need for them arises in the students' writing."

13. **Moderate marking of surface structure errors, focusing on sets or patterns of related errors**
"The ineffectiveness of heavy correction apparently stems from students' inability to make use of such feedback as a paper covered with red marks and marginal comments...Further, this approach creates another problem, a phenomenon that teachers call 'paper load.' Because marking every error in every student paper takes so much out-of-school time, teachers assign only as much writing practice as they can mark, and that amount is usually not enough for students to become practiced writers....It seems much more effective to identify one or two sets of related errors...and help students to focus their attention on a manageable set of problems as they draft their next piece of writing."

14. **Flexible and cumulative evaluation of student writing that stresses revision and is sensitive to variations in subject, audience, and purpose**
"Too often in school writing programs, pieces of writing are killed off by premature evaluation...Instruction shouldn't focus on catching and punishing weaknesses in early drafts, but rather on helping students develop additional stronger drafts...There are many approaches to flexible and cumulative grading...that share one assumption: that the function of evaluation in writing is to help the next piece be better than the last one, that is, to be genuinely formative, and not just a judgment."

15. **Practicing and using writing as a tool of learning in all subjects across the curriculum, not just in English**
"Studies have documented the connection between writing activities and subject matter learning...There is nothing more basic to success in high school itself, more closely tied to critical thinking, or more relevant to the prospect of higher education, than the ability to write."

Ms. Christine Wilson, of Northwest Guilford High School, has compiled the following list of factors that helped her 10th grade students to score well on the state writing assessment:

- Students were focused on writing and understood the importance of the test.
- Students were taught how to score essays using a simplified rubric (see page 33).
- Students practiced writing and scoring MANY times.
- Students wrote in timed, pressure situations to simulate the testing environment.
- Different parts of a successful essay were taught and emphasized one at a time, eventually leading to a complete essay.
- Numerous writing models were used, illustrating both poor writing and excellent writing.
- Students were taught to "attack" the prompt and develop a plan for their essays.
- Students wrote on a variety of literature and used a variety of prompts.
- Students compiled a Reading Portfolio of all the literature we studied and were therefore able to review easily and effectively prior to the test (see page 34).
- Students participated in a variety of review methods prior to the test.

The following Writing Instructions were also developed by Ms. Wilson:

Writing an Introduction

Introductions usually have three parts. The first part is the opener or interest catcher. The second part is a bridge from the opener to the thesis, and the final sentence is, of course, the thesis you have already written.

Ideas for openers/interest catchers:

1. state the central idea of the paper
2. show the significance of the subject
3. give brief background on the subject or piece
4. use a literary device (simile, metaphor, analogy)
5. use comparison/contrast
6. pose a challenging question
7. present a startling fact
8. make an unusual statement
9. make a remark that draws attention
10. begin with a quotation

Once you have an interest catcher, your next sentence (or two) should be a bridge to relate the opening statement to the thesis you have already composed. The last sentence is the thesis!

Writing a Conclusion

The conclusion rounds out your composition. It concludes your treatment of the subject. Since the conclusion is your last word to the audience, it is important that it reinforce the main idea of your composition.

Here are some ways of leaving a strong impression on your audience:

1. Summarize the main idea of your composition.
2. Repeat in different words the main ideas from your introduction, specifically the thesis.
3. Make a final statement that is an outgrowth of the points made in the composition.

Evaluation Guide: Essay

Writer's Name _____
Peer editor _____
PROMPT _____
1st draft _____
Revision _____

5 (96-100)

Check the following items that describe the essay.

__ A. Clearly states the thesis (relates to prompt).
__ B. Addresses all aspects of the prompt.
__ C. Paragraphs contain clear topic sentences.
__ D. Provides specific examples.
__ E. Provides elaboration for each example.
__ F. Organized with a logical progression.
__ G. Provides transition between ideas.
__ H. Uses a variety of sentence structure and vocabulary.
__ I. Conclusion provides completeness; answers the question "So What?"
__ J. Essay is free of grammatical and spelling errors.

If ALL descriptions are not checked, choose a score below that best fits. Check all descriptions that apply.

4 (88-92)

__ Needs more elaboration
__ Needs a strong conclusion
__ Grammar/spelling errors
__ Needs transitions
__ Needs sentence variety and advanced vocabulary

3 (78-82)

__ Missing part of the prompt
__ Needs elaboration
__ Needs a strong conclusion
__ Needs to work on sentence structure
__ Needs to improve focus/organization
__ Grammar/spelling errors

2 (71-75)

__ Lapses into summary
__ Paper is confusing
__ Not enough content to receive a higher score

1 (65)

__ States the prompt but little else

Non-Scorable (60)

__ Off-topic
__ Illegible

Lynne Murray (Southern Guilford High School)
Christine C. Wilson (Northwest Guilford High School)

Cyrano de Bergerac by Edmond Rostand (French)

Genre: play
Publication Date: 1897
Setting (place/time): Paris, France in 1640 (the final act is set in 1655)
Theme or Main Idea: One's soul and inner beauty are much more important than external appearance.

BRIEF plot synopsis:

Cyrano de Bergerac is (and has been for a long time) deeply in love with his cousin, Roxane, despite the fact that he is quite ugly. Roxane has no idea of his love for her and shares with him her feelings for Christian, a very handsome but not an eloquent man. Christian also loves Roxane, but as Cyrano is relaying messages to him from Roxane, Christian tells Cyrano of his inability to express himself, and Cyrano decides that they can work together to charm Roxane. Christian, unaware of Cyrano's motives, agrees to work with him, using Cyrano's eloquence, while Cyrano uses Christian's good looks to express his feelings. Together they fool Roxane, and Christian and Roxane get married. Cyrano becomes deeply involved in corresponding (writing) with Roxane while he and Christian are away at war. Eventually Roxane becomes so moved by the letters that she tells Christian she would love him even if he were grotesque, and in essence she is saying that she loves Cyrano's soul. Around this time Christian realizes that Cyrano *loves* Roxane. He wants Roxane to be told what's been going on and let her decide between the two of them. As Cyrano is getting ready to confront her, Christian receives a fatal wound in the battle so Cyrano tells him on his death bed that Roxane chose *him* – which is untrue. Roxane is so upset by Christian's death that she goes into deep mourning and joins a convent. For the next fifteen years Cyrano faithfully visits her at the same time weekly. One day a log is dropped on his head, and he is very close to his death. He still makes the visit (barely) and is only a couple minutes late. She does not notice that anything is wrong with him until she is told by one of Cyrano's dearest friends. But, by that point, he is very close to his death. He asks to read Christian's last letter that Cyrano himself had written, and at this point begins to recite the letter from memory. Roxane realizes that he was the one she has loved all those years, but it is too late. She apologizes, professes her love for him, and shortly thereafter he dies.

List of Significant Characters

Cyrano de Bergerac–cousin to Roxane; deeply in love with Roxane; ugly; excellent fighter; protagonist
Roxane–cousin to Cyrano; married to Christian; in love with Cyrano's soul; book based on love for her
Christian–married to Roxane; poor speaker of feelings; handsome; member of the love triangle
Le Bret–very close friend of Cyrano; helped Cyrano when upset, advisor and confidant to Cyrano
Ragueneau–baker friend & helper of Cyrano, with him at death
De Guiche–head of Cyrano and Christian's army branch; loved Roxane, but married; added an "enemy" twist

Important Symbols or Allusions:

Cyrano's Nose = remarkable character, nose not only unusual thing, *he* is unusual
Ragueneau = bakers and poets symbolize each other (very similar), both you must live off of

Distinguishing Characteristics or style of work: flamboyant play, colorful characters, fighting, humorous, tragic.

Personal Response to content and style of work:

I loved Cyrano De Bergerac. It had a little of everything: love, violence, humor, and suspense. It was a book I could not put down. At the beginning of the play, I did not like Cyrano too much, and I liked Roxane a lot. By the end of the play, I felt completely the opposite way. I felt so sorry for Cyrano, and I thought Roxane was sort of dumb for not realizing the truth earlier. It was a tear jerker at the end because throughout the whole book the reader always thought Cyrano and Roxane would get together, but they never did. A similar situation seems to happen a lot in the real world, which made me relate to it quite well. It is a topic quite close to home. Many people are attracted to each other by looks alone when there should be much more to a relationship. The author was quite aware of present day social situations. Once I got the hang of skipping from place to place (as in the opening scene), I thoroughly enjoyed the style of writing the author used. I would recommend this book to almost everyone. It was GREAT!

Sarah Foy, student (Northwest Guilford)

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Getting it Write

The Assessment of Writing in the North Carolina Testing Program

This handout contains information regarding the assessment of writing in North Carolina.

Strategies for Improving Writing Performance

- Be sure students understand characteristics of the four modes of writing: narrative, description, clarification (expository), persuasive (argumentative), and point-of-view (expository). Papers are scored within a mode.
- Students should use the writing process throughout the year to improve writing skills, but they should be made aware that the writing test is an on-demand type writing. Therefore, it would help to make them aware of the differences by doing some practice on-demand writing.
- Help students to understand the four composing characteristics.
- Help students to understand the score scale used for scoring their essay by using sample papers.
- Show the students exemplar essays and use the scoring criteria and rubric to explain the high scores.
- Let students score each other's essays and justify their scores by using the criteria and rubric.
- Analyze prompts with students so they will read closely and understand expectations. Also, help them to focus on the key word(s) in the prompt (e.g., "tell a story," "describe," "explain," "convince") and be able to classify by mode from these key words. See if they can write prompts for a particular mode and explain what would be expected of them in responding.
- Encourage them to constantly refer to the prompt as they write to be sure they focus on the main idea.
- In analyzing supporting details:
  - Are they clearly linked to the main idea they are supposed to be supporting?
  - If examples are used, do they add additional depth or understanding or do they just repeat the idea?
  - When adjectives are used, do they link back to the main idea or do they give another level of understanding to the prompt?
  - A powerful verb is often more effective than a long string of adjectives.
  - Use specific concrete modifiers. Ex.: A "two-story house" rather than "big house".
  - The essay length does not determine its score. Supporting details must be specific and relevant.
- Students must be selective by deciding what is important and then elaborating those points. Avoid giving students a specific number of points to produce since this varies depending on their topic. Also, they may lose the overall main idea. Ex.: "Describe a kitchen." The student might chose a stove. The reader knows how the appliance looks but does not know how the kitchen looks.
- Avoid giving students a definite number of characteristics to produce. It will vary by their choice of topics and the mode of writing. Ex.: five paragraphs, ten adjectives, four reasons.
- Forcing a specific number leads to formula writing which may occasionally help the very weak with structure and organization but can limit the able writer. They often allow the organization to become the main focus and lose their focus on content with very little supporting relevant details.
- Sensory descriptors can enhance a student's writing, but students have difficulty using the senses as an organizational strategy and the overall focus becomes weak. It is often a forced organizational strategy because, depending on the student's choice, certain senses may not be applicable and the student must deal in generalities. This causes vague supporting details.
- For descriptive writing read essays aloud and see if students can draw a picture. Read examples for different score points so they can see the importance of locators, size, and specific details.
- For narrative writing students should be able to do a time line of the sequencing of events.
- In persuasive and point-of-view students must give sound reasons, and the supporting details should show progression. Cause and effect writing is an effective way of elaborating, but students should not allow the cause and effect technique to overrule the content. Elaboration must be present.
- Students must realize that the writing test is one measure on one day of their year scored by purely objective readers who use the criteria and score scale in the scoring guide.
- Students must write on pages 3 and 4 of the answer document. Extra pages cannot be scored.

Numerous school systems have implemented systematic writing programs. Burlington's Writing Program is presented as one model for planning across grade levels.

Writing Program, Burlington City School System
January, 1996

In the Burlington City Schools System, two elementary/middle school teachers and one high school teacher serve grades 3-12 as resource writing teachers. It is the responsibility of these teachers to plan, teach, and evaluate student writing, a great part of which is geared toward the NC Writing Assessment.

The two teachers work with students in Burlington's two middle schools and six elementary schools to coordinate preparation for the statewide assessment of writing in Grades 4 and 7. Resource writing teachers plan together to generate writing activities. Students are expected to complete the writing started by the resource writing teachers during the demonstration session. The classroom teacher is responsible for reading and evaluating each student's completed writing and forwarding it to the resource writing teacher for further evaluation and feedback. The lesson cycle is completed when the resource writing teacher returns the papers and corresponding feedback to the classroom teacher. A more in-depth description of the writing program follows:

A Sequential Program: Resource teachers have developed a plan for working with the various grade levels. This plan is based on student needs for state testing. The resource teacher is not the only source of student instruction. It is the responsibility of the classroom teacher to conduct a writing program that transcends the modes taught by the resource teacher. Writing fluency and voice are greatly enhanced by creative writing lessons conducted by our classroom teachers. Following is a copy of the writing program for Grades 3-8. Note that this plan has been revised to correlate with changes in the state testing.

As previously stated, resource teachers spend some time in planning writing activities. Upon completion, these activities are sent to the appropriate grade levels. These activities may be in any one of several forms, such as:

- A mini-lesson on elaborating a reason
- A mini-lesson on elaborating an event
- Ideas for writing poetry
- Some other creative writing idea

Classroom teachers seem to appreciate these "extras" which they can keep on hand to use without a lot of preparation. Sometimes the activities are open-ended questions that the teachers can use with the novel they are teaching.

Lesson Follow-Up: As shared in the overview, in addition to the "extras" mentioned in the preceding, resource teachers also prepare and, at the conclusion of the demonstration lesson, leave a follow-up lesson(s) with the classroom teacher. Usually, the first follow-up is designed for comple-

tion of the writing exercise and is a good example of working hand-in-hand with the resource teacher. The completed papers are read by the classroom teacher and then forwarded to the resource teacher for assessment. The purpose of both classroom and resource teacher review of student writing is to identify any weaknesses which may exist and to develop remedial activities. Usually this entails planning and conducting mini-lessons designed specifically to address weakness. This is always done before moving to the second follow-up, which may be another prompt using the same writing mode as that which was introduced during the resource teacher's lesson.

Student Paper Review and Evaluation: A major part of the writing program is reading and evaluating student writing. After reading student papers, the resource teacher will assess the papers in one of several ways:

- Write comments which the classroom teacher may use in conferencing with students.
- Write general comments which the classroom teacher may use for group lessons.
- Base the next resource writing teacher's lesson on the weaknesses found in using a particular mode of writing.
- Design a mini-lesson addressing a weak area, i.e. developing one event fully or elaborating a reason sufficiently.
- Score the papers, using the state scoring rubric and giving an explanation of the score. (This is usually done only for one or two papers per student before the state test.)

Criterion Tests: Another method used to give students a "feel" for where they might place on the state test scoring scale is the Burlington City Schools nine-week criterion tests. The criterion test has a writing portion requiring student use of an appropriate writing mode for each grade level. Classroom teachers use the state rubric to score the writing portion of the test. A database has been prepared for seventh grade classes which enables classroom teachers to see at a glance the scores made by each student on the state narrative and descriptive tests taken in Grades 4 and 6, respectively, as well as the results of the first criterion test given this year in the seventh grade. The purpose of this data is to help the classroom teacher to identify those students who need special attention. Additionally, students, after reviewing their overall test results, are being encouraged to set personal goals to top last year's score. This approach seems to be challenging students.

End-of-Year Activity: At the end of the year, following the return of state test papers and scores, resource writing teachers devote considerable time reading test papers to analyze student writing strengths and weaknesses. The results of this analysis are shared with classroom teachers. Additionally, resource teachers use results in preparing lesson plans during the next year. Also used in lessons are anonymous student samples from the state test as a base for certain types of lessons.

It is pleasing to note that within the Burlington City Schools there are some teachers who use the "Writer's Workshop" approach to writing. Through peer and teacher conferencing, students learn to critique their own writing as well as that of their peers.

Grades 3-8 Writing Program
Based on State Writing Schedule

Grade 3: By the end of Grade 3, students will have been introduced to and will have practiced personal narrative.

Long Range Goals:

1. March through May-Introduce personal narratives to students.
2. Assess strengths and weaknesses of narrative writing and address weak areas with mini-lessons.
3. Design activities and prompts to improve students' performance in narrative writing.
4. Test in May during resource teacher's last visit (optional).

Grade 4: By February, students will be prepared in the narrative writing mode for the NC Writing Assessment Test. By the end of Grade 4, students should also be writing clarification papers with a topic paragraph, at least two elaborated reasons, and a closing paragraph.

Long Range Goals:

1. August through January-Introduce and practice clarification writing with outline.
2. Take NC Writing Test first Tuesday in February.
3. February through May-Introduce and practice clarification writing with outline.
4. March-Test clarification writing through Burlington City Schools criterion test.

Grade 5: By the end of Grade 5, students should be able to write both clarification and descriptive papers using appropriate outlines.

Long Range Goals:

1. August through February-Emphasize clarification writing.
2. February-Introduce descriptive writing with outline.
3. March through May-Concentrate on writing a description of an object, a person, and a place.
4. Test in May during resource teacher's last visit on either clarification or descriptive writing (optional).

Grade 6: By the end of Grade 6, students should be proficient in the clarification and descriptive writing skills and be introduced to the point-of -view writing mode.

Long Range Goals:

1. September through February-Through varied writing activities, determine strengths and weaknesses of student writing for narrative, clarification, and descriptive writing.
2. September through February-Do mini-lessons addressing weak areas of students' writing in the narrative, clarification, and descriptive modes.
3. Use a variety of writing such as narratives and poetry.
4. February through May-Introduce and practice the point-of-view writing mode.
5. March-Criterion test assessment of point-of-view writing.

Grade 7: By February, students will review and practice clarification and descriptive writing and be introduced to and practice the point-of-view mode of writing in preparation for the NC Writing Test.

Long Range Goals:

1. August through February-Introduce and practice point-of-view and persuasive modes.
2. August through February-Assess strengths and weakness of students in the point-of-view, clarification, and descriptive modes and do mini-lessons to address weak areas.
3. Develop prompts and activities to guide teachers in meeting individual and group needs.
4. Take the NC Writing Test the first Tuesday in February.

Grade 8: By the end of Grade 8, students will refine the narrative, clarification, descriptive, point-of-view, and persuasive writing modes.*

Long Range Goals:

1. September through May-Use across-the-curriculum writing to reinforce the narrative, clarification, descriptive, point-of-view, and persuasive modes.
2. Assess strengths and weaknesses through daily writing and criterion tests.
3. Use mini-lessons to address weak areas in students' writing.

** NOTE: With the change in state tested grade levels, the resource teachers may not find time to work in the eighth grade classrooms.*